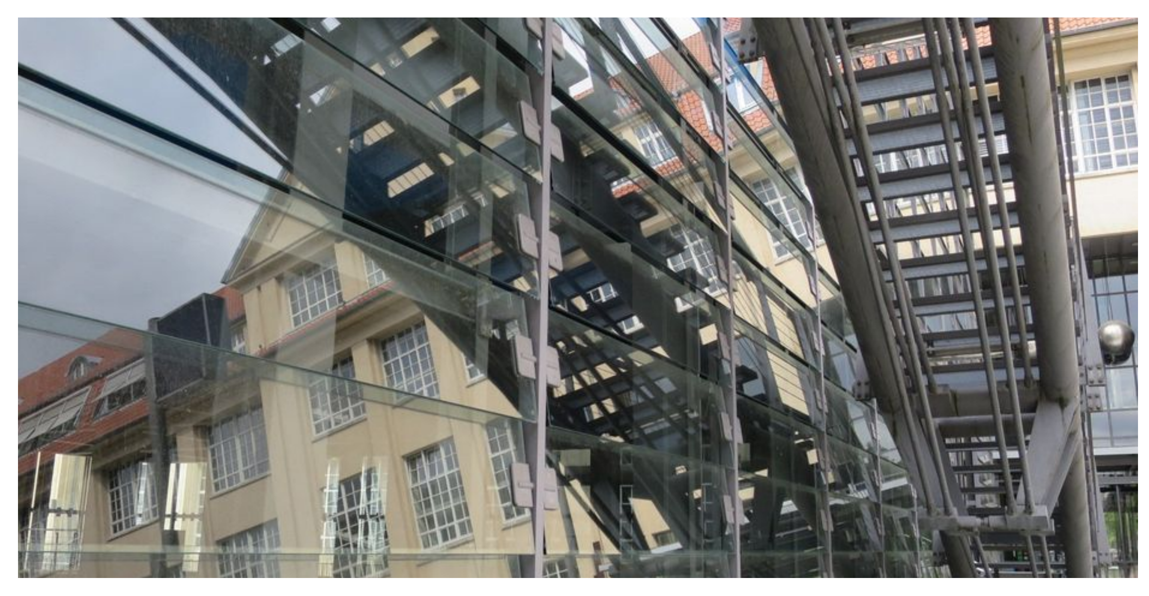






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READING CAPITAL LOGISTICALLY

ECONOFICTION CAPITAL, LOGISTICS, MARX, MARXISM, TRANSPORT, UPS

In the first logistical statements in Capital, Marx writes that because commodities are things they "cannot themselves go to market and perform exchanges in their own right," (1976:178) its guardians must lend them feet to move, and on the market "his tongue… to communicate their prices" (1976:189). Human feet, however, cannot walk that far, and after shouting prices voices become hoarse. After the logistics revolution, the tongues of commodities are no longer human, but barcodes and RFID chips, and while commodities still need help moving, they now travel in post-Panamax container ships and in large fleets of jet freight planes emblazoned with logos of UPS, FED EX and DHL, with ICT coordinating and scheduling their movement on the planetary market.

The purpose of this paper is to read Capital logistically, that is, I seek to tease out the logistical aspects of Das Kapital in order to get at a specific understanding of Marx's value theory. Marx, however, never mentions logistics or the associated term 'supply chain'. This is not surprising if we consider the etymology of logistics that shows it first use in 1879 from the French logistique (quartering troops), with roots to the Old French logeiz (shelter for an army, encampment); the concept of the supply chain is even more recent dating back to the early 20th century. It is unlikely that Marx, who died in 1883, could have been aware of either terms and especially their applicability to economic affairs. Arguably, however, he did write about logistics, particularly in the second volume of Capital—the mostly unread and ignored book that deals with the circulation process of capital. In that volume, he appears to subsume the function of logistics under accounting, writing that it is "[b]y way of book-keeping [that]…the movement of capital is registered and controlled" (1978:211). In addition, he discusses activities that would today be recognized as logistical, such as transportation, warehousing, inventory, packaging and materials handling.

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